

# Crowded house

**J**ennifer is in search of her life. A young lawyer, in her early twenties, "the offspring of Eastern Cape respectability, with all its wholesomeness and grass-banked suburbs", she flees the claustrophobia and racism of her background and moves to Cape Town, "the city of the wild and the possible." There she moves into a house with her friend Susan, a chain-smoking painter who never actually paints and newly-divorced from a dipso husband, where the two of them embark upon as many meandering and neurotic sexual, political and artistic encounters as they can find. This isn't supposed to



## TOUCHING THE Lighthouse

By Jo-Anne Richards

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be the story of me, says Jennifer, it is supposed to be the story of our black cleaner, Maud. But Maud remains ever in the wings as Jennifer, centre stage, complains of a lack of identity; an egocentric ty

which she justifies as just another product of warped politics.

Sounds confused, self indulgent? *Touching the Lighthouse* is a really odd novel, one which sets up in its opening chapter the notion of vastness, of towering themes and bulging concerns, and then withdraws into the adolescent self-absorption of its central characters. The narrative displays much of the same intense confusion as Jennifer and Susan do themselves, which gives it a slightly - and I would guess unintentional - narcissistic feel. Jennifer refers often to the way in which the politics of apartheid seep into every area of life, but

evidence of this never rings true, and what is supposed to be the bedrock of the narrative becomes merely an adjunct.

I'm not sure what this failure stems from; very possibly from a talented writer trying to do too much at once. For although Richards suffers at times from whimsy she is capable of acutely expressive and intimate prose, of exposing in very few words the size and scale of an emotion or the impact of one person upon another. She is a lovely writer, but perhaps not so adroit a storyteller, and while the two abilities do not often co-exist in equal measure, they do need to meet if a novel is to be a success.

Perhaps if Richards had stuck to the disturbing quality of her characters' friendship, and not felt so self-consciously the need to write a novel about South Africa, then the

sights and smells of a country rank with corruption and injustice would have emerged more naturally and convincingly as the backdrop to a febrile and unresolved love affair. As it is, nothing in *Touching the Lighthouse* receives quite the attention it deserves; its pages are too busy and crowded, leaving its characters and its themes clamouring for recognition.

Mary Loudon

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